

Inflammatory Breast Cancer

Breast cancer is still the most common female cancer in the United States, the second most common cause of cancer death in women, and the primary cause of death in women ages 45 to 55. There are actually several types of breast cancer including ductal carcinoma, lobular carcinoma, Paget's disease of the breast, and others. Ductal carcinoma is the most rapidly growing subgroup of breast cancer, and probably the best known to most people.

Inflammatory breast cancer is considered a form of locally advanced breast cancer (LABC). The term locally advanced breast cancer is used to describe a breast cancer that has progressed locally but not yet spread beyond the breast and regional lymph nodes.

Inflammatory breast cancer is a specific type of breast cancer which produces a unique set of signs and symptoms. It often does not produce a distinct mass or lump that can be felt within the breast. This makes this type of cancer easy to miss or confuse with other conditions of the breast.

Inflammatory breast cancer causes thickening and swelling of the skin of the breast, which may be reddened and warm to the touch. The breast is often painful and enlarged, and appears "inflamed". The skin over the breast is warm, and thickened, with a "peau d'orange" (skin of an orange) appearance. The skin color can range from a pink flushed discoloration initially to redness or a purplish hue that may look like a bruise.

Patients typically present with pain and a rapidly progressing tender, firm, enlarged breast. Conditions usually confused with inflammatory breast cancer include infections and breast abscesses. However, these typically occur in lactating women, and patients usually present with fever and abnormal blood counts.

Mammographic findings in patients with inflammatory breast cancer may include characteristic skin thickening over the breast, with or without a dominant mass. If inflammatory breast cancer is suspected, a skin biopsy can be done to confirm or rule out the diagnosis.

Women can help protect themselves from this and other types of breast cancer by routine self breast exams and regular mammograms. All women should have an established relationship with their healthcare provider including regular periodic exams. If you have any concerns regarding your health or if you would like to have more information on breast self exams or mammograms, please contact Sams Army Health Clinic at 263-4127.

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